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Command and Staff College
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Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

**The 600-Pound Gorilla:
Why a Smaller Department of Defense
Is in the Best Interest of the United States**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR:

**Major Ryan P. Allen
United States Marine Corps**

AY 11-12

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member:  **ERIC SHIBUYA, Ph.D.**

Approved: 

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Oral Defense Committee Member: **ERIC SHIBUYA, Ph.D.**

Approved: 

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The 600-Pound Gorilla: Why a Smaller Department of Defense is in the Best Interest of the United States

Author: Major Ryan P. Allen, USMC

Thesis: The contemporary U.S. Defense Department is too large; a smaller DoD is in the best interest of the United States.

Discussion: The size and cost of the current U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) actually weakens U.S. power rather than enhancing it. Overreliance on the military form of national power, to the detriment of the domestic, economic, and informational forms of national power, weakens the United States' position in international relations. The current size of the DoD is also economically unsustainable. As manpower costs increase, it costs more money to keep the same size manpower force, a trend that calls for a reduction in personnel, and therefore, reduction in the overall defense budget. Finally, the massive DoD and its added capability built up throughout the Cold War have resulted in U.S. strategic overreach. The post-Cold War United States tends to approach problems with the threat or use of military force, confusing national interests with national defense, resulting in overreach. A sound strategic framework gives a clear starting point in determining what is necessary for national security, and therefore, the proper size of the DoD. That framework must account for U.S. desired ends, ways, and means, as well as adversary capabilities and strategies. The size and cost of today's force is more than is necessary to provide U.S. national security. U.S. Government civilian leadership should reduce DoD personnel, equipment, and budget to a point that it can still protect the nation against realistic threats to national security, but no longer remains an economic or diplomatic vulnerability.

Conclusion: A smaller DoD is in the best interest of the United States because it would stop the overreliance on the threat or use of military force rather than the use of other elements of national power, would be economically viable, and would decrease overreach that weakens U.S. national security. It is possible, and advisable, to maintain a DoD that is smaller and cheaper than today's force, while retaining vital national defense capability.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been thinking about, and debating this topic with friends and colleagues, for about three years. In the past, my point of view on the benefits of a Department of Defense (DoD) reduction seemed quite contentious to many people and drew considerable, heated disagreement. I have found over the course of the past year that these thoughts cause less of a debate, most likely due to lingering operations in Afghanistan, the end of operations in Iraq, and the continued economic recession. The President released new defense guidance in January of 2012, during the final stages of my work on this paper. The President's guidance and outline for a leaner DoD gives a different context to the thoughts that I lay out in this paper. This paper is not an endorsement of the guidance given by the President, which approaches the problem almost exclusively from an economic point of view. Rather, for the reasons listed in this paper I try to explain that not only do we need to trim the DoD in response to the current economic situation, it is in our best interest to make these reductions, and they will actually make America stronger and better able to defend itself.

I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan Phillips for his patient assistance and mentorship on this project. Dr. Phillips was quick to offer helpful suggestions, and introductions to experts who helped in refining the arguments in this paper. I would also like to thank all of my colleagues with whom I have discussed this topic over the years. I value their points of view, which often conflicted with the views I express in this paper, but were valuable and appreciated nonetheless. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank my family, especially my wife Ruth, for their support, and for allowing me the time to research and write this paper, in addition to all of the other time that they gave me to study this year.

Where does an 800-pound gorilla sit?...Wherever it wants.

- Anonymous

INTRODUCTION

The largest gorillas found in the wild weigh around 500 pounds, and gorillas living in captivity can weigh over 600 pounds.¹ The 800-pound gorilla of the classic riddle gets whatever it wants by virtue of its exaggerated size. There are no smaller creatures, or other large gorillas for that matter, that could stop it, and it dominates without competition. While the 800-pound gorilla's size is beneficial to him, it is unnecessarily large. The gorilla does not need that much mass when 700 or even 600 pounds would be enough weight and power to have its way when necessary, and sit where it needs to sit. One can say the same for the 21st Century Department of Defense (DoD). The contemporary U.S. Defense Department is too large; a smaller DoD is in the best interest of the United States.

The current DoD size in terms of manpower and budget is unnecessarily large, and serves as a liability in some respects, counter to the security and stability that U.S. citizens expect. Of course, DoD provides national defense that is necessary, but at its current size, it also comes with unintended effects. Overreliance on military power and the use of military force, instead of utilization of other forms of national power, is an unintended but natural result of an overly large and extremely capable DoD. The DoD budget is too large to remain at its current level, and the amount currently spent by the U.S. Government on defense is unsustainable if the United States wishes to regain economic viability. Finally, the current excessively large size of the DoD results in strategic overreach, does not match realistic threat projections, and ironically, weakens the United States over time.

The United States can reverse these unintended consequences with a sound plan for reduction of DoD manpower and budget. Of course, any reduction must be in harmony with national security, defense, and military strategies to be effective. Military strategy nests in the President's National Security Strategy and in the Secretary of Defense's National Defense Strategy. Reduction measures that do not account for elements of these strategies are ill advised and reckless. Therefore, sound military strategy that addresses current and future threats must be the starting point.² With a National Military Strategy that addresses these threats, and a realistic approach toward what it will take to safeguard the nation in light of these threats, the United States can maintain a military that allows for the use of other forms of power, is economically sustainable, and does not encourage overreach.

BACKGROUND

The size of the U.S. active-duty military has ranged from a few thousand personnel in the Revolutionary War era to over 12 million personnel in 1945 at the conclusion of World War II (WWII). After WWII, the United States entered the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and remained in that conflict until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Cold War manpower levels fluctuated, and for the last decade of the war held at just over 2 million.³ Defense spending has similarly fluctuated over the life of the United States.⁴ Studying prior defense spending, previous threats to national defense, and the results of military conflicts gives one an idea of what the U.S. Government historically gets for its defense investment.

Pre-WWII America provides historical data for study in military preparedness and investment, but has little in common with today's defense situation. While this period shares few environmental characteristics with current global events, it does give perspective on how U.S. Founding Fathers and early leaders viewed the use of force and defense investment in terms of

manpower and spending. There were certainly conflicting views on the subject of proper military size, and the benefits and dangers of maintaining a large standing military. Thomas Jefferson, in keeping with the era's Republican wariness of standing armies, advocated for a militia system rather than a federal peacetime army.⁵ As President, Jefferson used naval forces to combat piracy, but advocated for a coastal protection navy, as opposed to a "navy which, by its own expenses will grind us with public burthens, and sink us under them."⁶ Alexander Hamilton represents the counter-argument of the day, calling for a standing federal army and navy. While Hamilton's views regarding the existence of federal peacetime defense forces differed from that of Jefferson's, Hamilton also warned of the "enormous accumulation of debts" that routinely accompany military forces engaging in "offensive war."⁷ Disagreements existed regarding the form of military force best suited for U.S. needs, but there was continuity in the desire to keep military spending and activity in check.

The Spanish-American War in 1898 marked the true emergence of the United States into world affairs. This conflict represented the end to over a century of isolationism with distant military action on the other side of the globe. U.S. military activity abroad spiked during World War I, and continued at low levels, mostly in the Western Hemisphere, until 1941. The period between 1941 and 1991 contained two unparalleled military events in U.S. history. WWII was a war of unprecedented scope and cost, and the Cold War was virtually low-level conflict for nearly half a century. These two events propelled the United States into a period of enormous defense spending, spending that continued at similar levels even after the Cold War.⁸

The reality of the post-Cold War defense posture is that defense spending and manpower levels are not as straightforward as estimating a threat and maintaining a DoD to address that threat. Politicians, the media, and defense industry messages often fan the flames of public

concern over defense, and the billions of dollars to be made in the defense industry provide natural temptation to overestimate needs. Claims of defenselessness and vulnerability will always resonate with citizens of any nation who expect protection from their government. Likewise, the reality of the impact of hundreds of billions of dollars in annual defense spending further motivates many in politics and industry.⁹ With jobs at stake, and public opinion on the issue swaying based on multiple contemporary domestic and foreign issues, politicians face difficult decisions in adjusting manpower or spending levels.

It is in this environment that the U.S. Government faces difficult decisions regarding the proper way to shape the DoD. The DoD must be able to provide defense to a nation with citizens around the globe, cooperate with allies worldwide, and if necessary fight adversaries ranging from global or regional powers to non-state actors wielding weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the DoD must conduct these requirements within necessary budgetary limits.

OVEREMPHASIS ON MILITARY FORM OF NATIONAL POWER

There are many ways to organize and distinguish forms of national power. One common organization of national power is the division of power into four categories: diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Governments use these forms of power in the process of international relations. Individual nations have strengths and weakness across the four forms of national power, and each nation uses their power in different ways to attain specific goals. Naturally, nations use most the elements of national power that are best suited to their strengths, and which suit their cultural and traditional norms. The combination of the use of the different forms of national power forms an identity, of sorts, for each nation in the international community. This combination develops over time as national interests shift, nations' strengths and weaknesses change, and the national or regional social and political climates change.

The United States that gained its independence in the late 18th Century used its national power in a much different way than the United States of the 21st Century, and this should come as no surprise. The national defense environment of the United States around the time of its founding is not the same as it is today. However, even with different threats, from different nations and groups around the globe, there are principles of defense that still apply today, just as they did then. The Founding Fathers of the United States wrote the duties for creating and maintaining an army and a navy into the Constitution. Article 1, Section 8 outlines Congress's duty in this area of providing for a "common defense."¹⁰ The apparatus that was established and eventually evolved into the Defense Department carries out the mission of national defense today, but does not necessarily exercise military power consistent with the idea of national defense as held by the Founding Fathers or many citizens today.

Political scientist Samuel Huntington, in his essay "American Ideals Versus American Institutions," writes about the gap between American ideals and the institutional practice of those ideals by government. Huntington suggests that throughout the political and governmental processes, American institutions are inconsistent in practice with the people's ideas.¹¹ In the defense environment, one can see this in the form of defense commitments that are not essential to the defense of the nation. Rather than using force for defense when absolutely required, the U.S. Government often uses military force for elective support of interests. For example, the United States conducted military operations in Bosnia, Iraq, and Libya, with tenuous connections to actual defense of the United States.¹² The use of military power in areas that may be better suited to the use of other forms of power unnecessarily disturbs the international community.

The use of U.S. military power often comes with media and popular discussions, domestically and abroad, of national sovereignty and legitimacy. The use of diplomacy,

economic, and informational forms of power rarely trigger such discussions. Sovereignty is a term without a concrete, globally accepted definition, but for most, generally means the right and responsibility of a nation's government to govern within its borders without external infringement.¹³ While many people around the world share this concept, historically, a realistic, if somewhat Hobbesian, view is that a nation is only as sovereign as stronger nations, or groups of nations, allow.¹⁴ Sovereignty of weaker nations may or may not be important to stronger nations based on current events and circumstances, and is not a fixed principle throughout American history.¹⁵ This view of sovereignty, cynical but realistic, does not mean however, that it is in the interest of stronger nations to violate the sovereignty of weaker nations.

The idea of legitimacy naturally arises during discussions of national sovereignty. Although legitimacy in the eyes of the world is something that most governments desire, it has not historically proven as a roadblock to military action. Nor can a nation, or group of nations, bestow legitimacy upon military action; legitimacy is more a perception than a writ. Some look to international organizations like the United Nations (UN) to provide legitimacy by vote, while many Americans chafe at the idea of UN approval as a prerequisite for legitimate military operations. Indeed, UN approval was not a prerequisite for action in Iraq for U.S. and British leadership who stated, "we should guard against speaking of the UN as a necessary source of legitimacy for action against Iraq."¹⁶ Although not required, internationally perceived legitimacy does have its place in planning for military action.

Embarking only upon "just" military actions, perceived as legitimate by the world at large, maintains a balance and stability to international relations. Nations that upset that international balance through unaccepted military use degrade that international system, no matter how powerful the individual acting nation. Just war and theories of legitimate military

action as elements of national power are more than rationalizations though; they are more than attempts to gain approval for military undertaking. The discussion of legitimacy and just war has almost ancient roots in the philosophy of international relations. Tracing its origins through Roman government, Christian theology, and into present day, just war theories have provided rationalization for the acceptability of war.¹⁷ Political scientist Andrew Hurrell writes that legitimacy in this context is “the existence of an international order reflecting unequal power and involving the use of coercive force that creates the need for legitimization in the first place” and it is “as much a part of the messy world of politics as of the idealized world of legal or moral debate.”¹⁸ An overreliance on the military aspect of national power tends to erode this international system, which is a stabilizing force in most cases, a benefit to even the most powerful countries, like the United States. Military force is only one instrument of power, and its overuse comes at the expense of the nation as a whole, and lessens the impact that the other forms of power can have.¹⁹

Diplomacy is an ongoing process of negotiation between nations or groups of nations. Diplomacy and diplomatic relations guarantee little, as they rely on relationships between nations in which both nations will tend to vie for their own interests. The result of the bargaining is likely a combination of the two interests, a compromise that is not what either nation desires in total, but is more palatable than the alternatives.²⁰ Members of powerful governments, or the citizens of those nations, often take exception to this uncertainty and compromise. What good is having power after all, if it means compromise and negotiation with less powerful nations? Although it is tempting for those in powerful nations to use force to get exactly what they want in a given situation, the cumulative result of that use of force, rather than a diplomatic process,

wears on a nation's credibility in the international scene, and ultimately weakens future attempts at the application of diplomatic power.

Historian and strategist Colin Gray extols the utility of hard power (military force and economic reward and punishment) and cautions against the expectation of results from soft power in his 2011 report for the Strategic Studies Institute. Gray writes that soft power "tends to co-opt the readily co-optable, while hard military power is necessary for more demanding missions."²¹ There are two problems with this overly simplistic view. The first problem is the idea that situations call for *either* hard or soft power, easier dilemmas being the purview of soft power and "more demanding" missions calling for hard power.²² The second issue is the dangerously shortsighted view on the use of military force to solve disputes. The idea that a nation can repeatedly use military force to solve "demanding" problems, without wearing on the international community, is faulty. Even for powerful nations such as the United States, force erodes legitimacy and political capital over time much more than compromise and diplomacy.

In U.S. history, one can see the ebb and flow in favor of diplomatic versus military forms of national power. Individual personalities, external threats, and other factors have historically combined, resulting in administrations and leaders who tended toward diplomacy or military force. Diplomacy in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was unique, at times non-existent, and usually combined heavily with military posturing.²³ Indeed, the very appointment of some personalities, such as John Foster Dulles in the Eisenhower administration, ensured that diplomacy with Soviets was not an option.²⁴ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the United States cut the State Department budget by twenty percent, resulting in the closure of over thirty embassies and consulates and the cutting of twenty-two percent of the department's

employees.²⁵ The cuts in the State Department resulted in increased operations for the Defense Department, a department for which those missions were not always a good match.

As the Clinton White House grew accustomed to using the DoD to cover these types of missions that it should have addressed through diplomacy, the DoD chafed. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, was seen as “obstructive” by the Clinton White House officials who wished to resolve the situation in Bosnia with military force.²⁶ The situation resulted in the now infamous quote from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: “What are you saving this superb military for...if we can’t use it?”²⁷ Powell had a similar encounter with civilian leadership in the Bush Administration years earlier during the lead up to the Persian Gulf War. Powell first sought defined political goals from the Bush administration before giving military options. Perturbed by the reluctance to act without political goals, then Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney barked, “I want some options, General.”²⁸

Retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni suggests a solution integrating all of the agencies and departments holding a stake in the nation’s defense. Zinni recommends the creation of a National Monitoring and Planning Center (NMPC). The NMPC would serve as a source of information and advice to U.S. leadership at the highest levels, regarding the global environment, encompassing all aspects of government in a “joint, inter-governmental team.”²⁹ Even this approach, while commendable for its “whole of government” philosophy, cannot escape the influence of the unnecessarily powerful DoD, however. Zinni describes the organization of the NMPC as “structured along the general lines of a military command center and a military integrated planning cell.”³⁰ One may rightly question the effectiveness of non-DoD agencies and department officials to act and advise in such an environment.

This demonstration of civilian tendency, from both U.S. political parties, to use military force either without clear political goals or as a substitute for other implements of national power, demonstrates the danger of maintaining an oversized military force. As long as there is a military force large enough in size and great in capability at the disposal of government, there will be a temptation and tendency to use that force as a quick problem solver to get the desired outcome without the uncertainty or compromise of diplomacy. To resolve this issue, it is imperative that the United States maintain a DoD sized and structured to respond only to true national security threats, and only after all other implements of national power are exhausted.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF OVERSIZED DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

The U.S. economy is staggering in scale and complexity. In 2011, the U.S. GDP stood at \$15 trillion, total federal revenue was \$2.2 trillion, and federal spending was \$3.8 trillion. It does not take an economist to see that in 2011 the United States ran a deficit; the United States spent (outlays) more money than it took in (receipts), and it has done so every year since 2001. Annual deficits, which in turn add to the total national debt, are the norm since WWII. The United States ran a budget deficit in seventy-five of the past one hundred years. Upon initial glance, seventy-five years of deficits out of one hundred seems bad, but it is even worse when one adds the numbers from those surplus years together. To put the size of current deficits in perspective, if one added every annual budget surplus dollar in the history of the United States together, the sum is about half of the amount added to the national debt in 2011 alone (\$1.3 trillion).³¹

The truly troubling aspect of the national debt is the rapid increase in accumulated debt over the past decade. In the past five years the United States amassed about one third (\$4.6 trillion) of the current total national deficit (\$15 trillion).³² Economists expect that after 2015, national debt will outpace GDP growth, resulting in the reduced possibility of being able to

“grow out of debt.”³³ There is no doubt that these trends over the past decade are hazardous and unsustainable, and one cannot attribute the source of the deficits to one area alone. Although not the only large area of spending for the United States, one of the consistently largest areas of spending is defense.

Defense spending amounts to 17% of federal spending in the President’s 2013 Budget proposal.³⁴ The size of annual defense expenditures, to which the U.S. people have grown accustomed for the most part, are typically presented in a such a way as to underemphasize the actual dollars being spent. For example, citing defense expenditures as a percentage of GDP is misleading in its own right. Americans would not think twice for paying four cents out of every dollar (as a percentage of GDP) for their security.³⁵ Conversely, if Americans knew that seventeen cents out of every dollar that the government spends, or thirty-two cents of every dollar received in taxes, went to the DoD, the reaction could be quite different.³⁶

The 21st Century U.S. defense spending trend is unsustainable. The situation is, however, not totally unique in American history. As the Korean War began to wane in 1952, U.S. Government officials began contemplating the impact of a decrease in defense spending in terms of the economy as well as military readiness and security. It was recognized that to “gain military security at the cost of fiscal and economic peril would be to gain no security at all, and play into the adversary’s hands.”³⁷ There must be a realization that too much defense, more specifically the money that it costs to provide that much defense capability, is nearly as dangerous to a nation in the long term as having too small a defense capability. A Defense Department study on military transformation defends this need to keep producing military capability at unequaled levels through research and development stating, “history and current trends indicate that merely attempting to hold on to existing advantages is a shortsighted

approach and may prove disastrous.”³⁸ Thus, according to the DoD, maintaining the current superiority is not enough for the United States, the gap must increase.

Historically, the United States pays for its wars “through a combination of tax increases, cuts in domestic programs and borrowing.”³⁹ The past decade has seen quite a different approach to paying for defense and war. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan mark the first time in U.S. history that the government cut taxes, and did not cut non-defense spending, while engaged in major war.⁴⁰ Seemingly, the United States and her citizens are having their cake and eating it, too. It should come as no surprise that fighting wars costs money, a dilemma that typically triggers the so-called “guns versus butter” debate. The U.S. Government seemingly avoided this debate in America’s most recent wars, but the short-term avoidance comes with a long-term cost.

Political scientist Alex Mintz concludes in his essay, “‘Guns’ vs ‘Butter’: A Disaggregated Analysis” that there has not been a “defense-welfare tradeoff” in post-WWII America.⁴¹ Mintz is right, there has not been a tradeoff; increased defense spending does not result in reduced domestic programs, it results in debt. Until recently, the government offset this increase in defense spending with revenue (bonds and/or taxes) increases. A dangerous reality now faces Americans who are willing to look at the numbers; guns *and* butter *and* reduced revenue equal mountains of debt. How did the United States arrive at this point? A large part of the answer is that there is simply too much money involved in defense, and too much influence over a Congress that naturally seeks constituent approval.

The responsibility for funding and oversight of national defense constitutionally falls on the Congress, while leadership of the military is the purview of the Executive branch. The constitutional funding and execution division was an important tactic of the framers to avoid executive wars like those undertaken by the English monarchy.⁴² Although the Constitution

separates these powers, the power of the purse held by Congress necessitates close ties with the defense industry where the appropriated money is spent. Eisenhower publicly warned of the dangers of what has become widely known as the military-industrial complex (MIC). Privately though, and with more accuracy, Eisenhower included the Congress and labeled the relationship the “delta of power.”⁴³

The delta of power more accurately describes a tripartite relationship where one party allocates the money, one party spends the money, and one party makes money. With as much money involved in defense spending as there has been in the past fifty years, however, the relationship is not as straightforward as may be expected. Congress does not always allot money based on a threat, and does not always do so because the military asks for it specifically. It is no longer in the DoD’s interest to save money or to return unused money to Congress, but this was not always the case. For example, the Marine Corps returned money to Congress during the 1920s.⁴⁴ Finally, the defense industry does not intend to watch Congress divert those defense dollars to some other program or agency.

The money that Congress allocates to defense has political strings, and this tie is unavoidable. Many members of Congress see military programs for the benefit they provide to their constituents in the form of jobs and state revenue, and the defense that those programs provide is nearly an afterthought.⁴⁵ Every year, the DoD budget contains unrequested funds for programs that mean jobs and happy constituents for Congress and industry, but not necessarily military utility. For example, the 1996 Defense Authorization Bill contained \$8 billion in unrequested spending, eighty percent of which went to states with lawmakers sitting on the Armed Services and National Security committees or the Appropriations Defense subcommittees.⁴⁶ The purpose of spending this unrequested money is not for defense, it is to

bring money and jobs to home districts and constituents. Money spent on defense should be for just that, defense, not as stimulus for congressional district economies.⁴⁷ There is simply too much money involved in defense in the United States for the system to be simple or straightforward.

America is paying an unnecessarily large sum for defense, due in part to Congress' incentive to funnel defense dollars and jobs home to their districts - but what is the solution? It is rational behavior for members of Congress to seek and pass legislation bringing defense dollars to their districts. The reward for doing so is reelection, and there is presently no penalty. Detailed Congressional reform is beyond the scope of this paper, but a simple solution in this area exists. Eliminating unrequested money in the defense budget is a start. These unrequested funds are often a direct injection into the state economies of the members who propose them. If Congress recognizes a true requirement, and they wish to provide funds, the DoD, or an independent body can decide how and where that money is spent, eliminating incentive to add pork to defense authorizations. One must recognize the fact that more money involved in defense spending means more incentive to take advantage of the system. Extra defense dollars result in extra corruption.

The DoD that Americans pay for is the most effective and capable military in the world, and probably in the world's history, but it is not worth the amount that it costs, and the costs are growing. Manpower costs alone are growing at a rapid rate. The annual cost for pay and training of an active-duty soldier rose from \$75,000 in 2001 to \$120,000 in 2006, excluding indirect costs like family housing.⁴⁸ The United States pays too much for too much defense capability, and could spend significantly less money and defend itself nearly as well. This is a dangerous proposition, however, for democratically elected politicians who have votes to lose, and for

defense industrialists who have money to lose. Politicians propose defense spending reductions with great trepidation, if they are bold enough to do so at all. The recent speech by President Barack Obama for example, calls on Americans to understand that “we can keep our military strong and our nation secure with a defense budget that continues to be larger than roughly the next ten countries combined.”⁴⁹ This is a clear demonstration of the defense inferiority complex thrust on the American people by Congress, the DoD, and the defense industry; a call for more and more defense spending based more on economic and political desires than on real-world threats to national security.

RESULTING WEAKENING OF THE UNITED STATES

On the surface, it is counterintuitive to propose that a strong and large DoD will weaken the United States over time. To militarists, hegemonists, and the defense industry, the military cannot be strong enough. In their view, there will always be critical threats to U.S. national security that are on the verge of destroying the United States. The United States does indeed face threats to national security now, and will continue to do so in the future. That does not mean, however, that the U.S. structures its defense apparatus appropriately to counter those threats. The current size and structure of the U.S. military is ill suited to address challenges that the United States has faced in the past ten years, and may in the near future. Today’s DoD structure remains based on Cold War requirements and threats, and that basic structure drives policy and political strategy, causing overreach and eventually resulting in a weaker United States. One must examine realistic current and future threats to arrive at a proper match of defense capability.

One can organize current and near-term threats to the United States into two general categories: threats from non-state groups and competitor nation-states. The former became a very real issue for the United States on 9/11. Since those attacks, the United States has been fighting

non-state groups around the globe, but from a military standpoint primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan. The latter threat, of competitor nation-states, has always been a threat to national security, and always will be. The complex and important questions relating to nation-state threats remain - how much of a threat do certain countries pose, and how will that threat manifest? The government's strategy to counter these threat groups must be the starting point in a determination of defense posture and organization. Building and maintaining a DoD that is equipped, manned, and trained to address either of these threat groups is not as daunting as one would initially think.

Non-state groups such as Al-Qaeda have used, and will continue to use, terrorism and irregular tactics against larger and more powerful entities like the United States and other governments. Understandably frustrating to many Americans, it is the natural tactical choice for non-state groups, who wisely do not wish to fight U.S. strengths. Competitor nation-states pose a different security challenge. Nation-states may engage in acts as benign as economic competition, and as malicious as full-scale conventional war, or any point in between. Historically, Americans worry most about this conventional threat when thinking about national defense. The U.S. defense industry has long been postured to battle rival conventional forces, and getting away from that mentality proves difficult. Rather than deriving defense strategy and structure based on threats to U.S. national security, strategy is in danger of being constructed based on current organization and capabilities.⁵⁰

It is extremely likely that non-state groups will attack the United States again. To address this threat, one must ask what role they expect the DoD to play against that threat. Indeed, that task falls not only on the DoD, but the Department of Homeland Defense, and other government agencies. The DoD may have a role in reaction to a terrorist attack depending on the attack's scale and origin, and would certainly have a role in preventing some types of actions originating

outside of U.S. borders, but for the most part the current DoD organization and structure would be of little use in preventing another 9/11 type of attack. If one accepts this logic, the only choices are to change the DoD to provide this defense, or to expect that defense from other departments and agencies. Assigning a Homeland defense-type mission to the military is redundant and has potential constitutional issues if conducted on U.S. soil.⁵¹ If the DoD should not be organized and tasked to prevent such an attack, one must then look at what reaction the DoD could have to such an attack as part of the national defense strategy.

The U.S. reaction to the 9/11 attacks was primarily a military one. Examining this reaction is important in determining if the United States military is a good choice for terrorist attack response. Whether the U.S. Government expected it or not, the response to the 9/11 attacks continues to this day. Depending on whether or not one includes Operation Iraqi Freedom in that response, the 9/11 attacks resulted in nineteen years (nearly nine in Iraq and over ten in Afghanistan) of military action for the DoD. The capability and size of the DoD at the time of the attack served as an indicator as to what the national response would be. The years of defense preparation and focus on overwhelming conventional force resulted in the United States relying on that force as the only acceptable measure of response.⁵² The United States does not have the money or national will for that type of response to become the norm.⁵³ If adversaries see that scale of response as a prediction of future U.S. strategy, non-state and state actors alike will choose that tactic and watch the United States fall on the sword of overreach. In this respect, the Global War on Terror serves as an opportunity for rival states like China and Iran.⁵⁴

Many envision conflict with competitor nation-states in terms of head-to-head conventional military action, and speculate that China is a potential foe in that regard. The U.S. Government must shape defense strategy, and therefore organization and size, around this type

of threat. One must avoid the conventional approach to the problem however, in favor of a realistic look at how such a conflict would occur. It is possible, but unlikely, that China and the United States could engage in large-scale conventional, or even nuclear war. However, economic competition and occasional disputes between the two nations are much more likely than conventional war.⁵⁵ Deterrence theory correctly indicates that conventional wars with nations like China are undesirable to both sides due to the costs that both nations would incur, with virtually no benefit.⁵⁶

An invasion of the United States by conventional forces of nations like China, or any other reasons that the United States would muster conventional forces against such an adversary, are not valid reasons to maintain a large standing active force in the DoD. History proves that the United States, if only due to its geographic position, is mostly insulated from large-scale conventional attack, and has time to build up forces in that event or in similar national emergencies. A strategy of proxy war and enticement are currently, and in the future, more likely from competitor nations like China. In this strategy, competitor nations engage the United States indirectly through other nations or non-state actors, which are more openly hostile to the United States.⁵⁷ Therefore, the United States must carefully measure potential military involvement in such conflicts, and decide whether it is necessary to maintain a 1.4 million-person standing active force to address such threats.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has used its military might in conflicts that are arguably not strictly national defense missions. Hegemonists advocate the use of force to influence and shape the world in terms of United States interests, which is starkly different than advocating the use of military force for national defense.⁵⁸ The American public will generally accept and embrace the use of military force for those situations that are genuinely national

defense, while military force used to further interests is much more difficult to explain to Americans.⁵⁹ There will always be varying interpretations as to what circumstances constitute a threat to U.S. national security, and what constitutes a threat to national interests. Generally, superpowers do not fight small wars to defend themselves, they fight small wars to establish stability or exert control.⁶⁰ The challenge for the United States will be in carefully weighing what situations constitute a genuine threat, and what situations have outcomes that are merely in the interests of the United States. There is a large difference in the two terms, which many use interchangeably, and the lack of discrimination between the two has resulted in military overreach.⁶¹

RECOMMENDED FUTURE FOR THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

The current U.S. defense situation results in overuse at the expense of other forms of national power, costs too much, and results in strategic overreach. To remedy this situation, the United States government must change why and how it uses the DoD, and must change its size and composition as well. The appropriate starting point for this change must be a “top down” review of the U.S. strategic framework.⁶² P.H. Liotta and Richmond Lloyd recommend starting the strategic framework review with a series of questions – “What do we want to do? How do we plan to do it? What are we up against? What is available to do it? What are the mismatches?” and most importantly “Why do we want to do this?”⁶³

The answer to the question of what the United States wants to do is important. Aggressively promoting American ideals and democratic systems of government, even without military force, can create animosity and spark the kinds of conflict that the United States seeks to avoid in the first place.⁶⁴ This dynamic is exacerbated by the type of constant military activity seen following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁶⁵ It is noteworthy that the first questions in the Liotta

and Lloyd model are not the first questions asked in practice; often the questions start with “What are we up against?” and “What is available?”

One can find myriad answers to the question of what the United States is “up against”. Officially, according to the 2011 National Military Strategy, the United States faces an “evolution to a ‘multi-nodal’ world characterized by more shifting, interest-driven coalitions based on diplomatic, military, and economic power, than by a rigid competition between opposing blocs.”⁶⁶ The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) describes the current and near-future defense environment by stating, “not since the fall of the Soviet Union or the end of World War II has the international terrain been affected by...the rise of new powers, the growing influence of non-state actors, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and other destructive enabling technologies.”⁶⁷ The same document details the force required to meet these “far-reaching and consequential shifts,” but does not recommend significant change to current force structure to meet these challenges.⁶⁸ The congressionally mandated independent QDR review panel report notes that QDR reports have “become a mirror of the current budget process rather than a strategic guide to the future that drives the budget process.”⁶⁹ The next question that strategists must address is the question of how the United States plans to defend itself.

What is currently available to the United States for national defense? Due to the massive build up and retention of manpower and equipment during the Cold War, much is available, but one can see that what is available may not match with what the United States needs. Indeed, the debate will continue to fluctuate. There will always be those who argue that it is not a question of needing more troops, but how many more, as was the case during Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁷⁰ Maintaining enough conventional military forces to engage in multiple, simultaneous, and major regional conflicts is not realistic. One must place the focus on how and when the United States

should use military force to attain policy objectives, rather than on how much military power the United States has.

The “how” is what really determines the size, structure, and capability of the future DoD. Historians often point to the interwar period of the 20th Century as an indication of successful and unsuccessful peacetime preparation for future conflict. One can see development or lack of development in each of the WWII participant nations that contributed to their success or failure during WWII. Some nations, or even groups within nations, sought change in doctrine to accompany technological advancements, while others rationalized the idea that their doctrine was sound, presupposing away the changes to their defense situation.⁷¹ Many authorities in the area of defense transformation and reorganization point out that the United States has not substantively changed the DoD since the end of the Cold War. To be sure, the threats that the United States encounters today are much different from those of the 1980s. The DoD must reexamine everything, even the stationing of its troops, to assure that it does not waste money sustaining troops stationed overseas. Cost savings estimates in the billions of dollars are simply an added benefit to restructuring the U.S. DoD footprint in Europe, where tens of thousands of U.S. troops reside; a lingering Cold War accumulation of overseas military mass unnecessary in today’s defense environment.⁷² Changes in threat analysis are necessary, but changes in the size of the U.S. military are necessary as well.

To be sure, a reduction in the size of the DoD, in terms of manpower, is a contentious issue. Many analysts use the size of a nation’s military synonymously with its capability. Political Scientist Peter Feaver warns that “It serves no purpose to establish a protection force and then to vitiate it to the point where it can no longer protect. Indeed, an inadequate military institution may be worse than none at all.”⁷³ Feaver is correct, but many analysts today

incorrectly surmise that defense reduction equals “vitiation.” While the size of a force is one indicator of its might, size alone as an indicator of successful defense is dangerously misleading. Arbitrary, across-the-board cuts in the DoD are unwise; what they may give in “fairness” to all branches and programs, they cost in real capability, and result in a truly hollow force.⁷⁴ The threat of a hollow force is usually one of the first terms one encounters in the examination of manpower reduction, but this need not be true.

The DoD can retain capability while reducing personnel if the department approaches the task correctly. To avoid the hollow force phenomenon, the DoD must eliminate redundant capabilities, such as multiple units that perform the same mission, while retaining effectiveness within that capability. For example, a nation may require multiple armored divisions to engage in multiple, simultaneous, conventional wars. While the capability requirement is legitimate, the amount of that capability is in question, and the nation could reduce the amount of the capability, without eliminating the capability as a whole. There is a warning associated with these types of reductions, however. The United States cannot rapidly recreate certain capabilities, like nuclear submarines, special operations forces, and tactical missile defense systems, after emergencies.⁷⁵ The requirement for the capability remains, but in most cases the DoD can reduce the amount.

One can also see the benefit to this approach in manpower versus procurement costs. A smaller manpower force saves money. That savings is vital to research and development, as well as maintenance for these capabilities.⁷⁶ With the capability safely maintained, the services can add manpower if the defense situation requires. U.S. Government leadership, civilian and military, must constantly revisit the requirement for each defense capability. History indicates, and future circumstances will reinforce, that the need for rapidly deployable ground forces is a constant.⁷⁷ The size of this deployable ground force is debatable, but its existence is not.

A smaller force does not necessarily result in a hollow force. Recent research on the subject indicates that nearly all of the contributing factors leading to the post-Vietnam hollow force do not exist today.⁷⁸ U.S. leaders can avoid creating a hollow force if they properly address the current situation within a sound strategic framework. In fact, a smaller force may be what is required to remain a functional and effective force at all.⁷⁹ U.S. Government civilian and military leadership must take great care in defense reductions, as those reductions will influence national security decades into the future. Reductions in manpower and budget can result in a honed military force that, while less capable in a Cold War-style massive conventional war, is more aligned with current and future security threats, without wholesale loss of capability.

CONCLUSION

History indicates that “inertia overwhelms the impulse to change at the Pentagon,” and “the military will resist transformation,” but the current situation calls for change nonetheless.⁸⁰ The United States relies on military force, or the threat of force, because military force is its strength. It is natural for a nation to play to its strengths in international relations, but it must do so with caution, and it must conduct an honest assessment of the results of the maintenance and use of that strength. U.S. policy currently, and for the foreseeable future, relies too much on the military instrument of national power, at the expense of the other instruments. This overreliance is a direct and natural result of an inflated DoD, and it weakens the U.S. position in the international community. Defense spending levels of the past decade are unsustainable, and unnecessarily create vulnerabilities. Finally, the colossal size of the DoD results in the use of military power without great hardship on the American people, thereby resulting in overuse and strategic overreach. These aspects of today’s DoD indicate a need to reduce its size in budget and manpower in the interest of maintaining the United States’ place in the 21st Century world.

The United States should continue to maintain the strongest and most capable military in the world. This paper does not constitute a call for world peace, or a desire to weaken security to pander to world community activists. Furthermore, the United States cannot reduce DoD to a weakened point and rely upon the good will and humanity of its competitors to act peacefully. The strongest answer for the future of the DoD is to trim its size, creating a force that while smaller than the Cold War force, remains the most capable in the world, and remains able to respond to realistic threats to national security.

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